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To Remarry or Not to Remarry? 1 Timothy 5:14 in Early Christian Ascetic Discourse

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To remarry or not to remarry? 1 Timothy 5:14 in early Christian ascetic discourse

The Reformation gave a strong impetus to a development, which has made marriage and family the (Protestant) Christian norm and singleness the exception. This article examines ascetic ideals in early Christianity from the viewpoint of remarriage. While staying celibate was uncommon, the valorisation of an ascetic lifestyle was prevailing—as long as it represented “true” asceticism, based on free will, and not “heretical” asceticism, allegedly based on false grounds. It was not an easy task to harmonize some scriptural teachings to such ascetic tendencies. One of the problematic passages was the recommendation to let young widows remarry (1 Timothy 5:14). This article analyses reading strategies applied to this passage by three ascetically inclined authors, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, and Epiphanius. In spite of their different geographical and historical situations and differences in their attitude towards remarriage, their readings of this passage contains several similarities—along with some dissimilarities.

Keywords: asceticism, widows, remarriage, 1 Timothy

One of the most far-reaching legacies of the Reformation has been its valorisation of marriage and family. Although the reformers stripped marriage of its sacramental status, they simultaneously elevated it to a position equal with or even superior to celibacy.¹ Celibacy was no longer valued as the “higher calling”; on the contrary, everyone was encouraged to marry. According to Luther, there are some exception to this rule, but celibacy “for the kingdom of heaven” (cf. Matt. 19:11–12) is a rare gift, “a special miracle of God,” fit for perhaps one in a thousand people.² It is not possible for the ordinary person to keep, since it requires “the strength of angels and the power of heaven.”³ Thus, the preferred Christian calling was to marry and raise a family.

The journey from the Reformation to the twenty-first century, however, is a long one. Luther and other reformers were not promoters of modern (let alone postmodern) sexual ethics. They were very much children of their own time, whose views did not always differ from those of their contemporary, Catholic counterparts. Marriage was seen as a highly hierarchical structure

which was, first and foremost, necessary to control the sinful lust of human sexuality.⁴ Moreover, the new ideology of marriage as the preferred calling for laity and clergy alike changed the prevailing practices less than sometimes imagined. Even though revered as a spiritually ideal way of life, celibacy in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages had remained an unpopular choice; likely, most Christians would have married and raised a family all through the centuries.⁵ Even many of the priests lived in long-term relationships, which was quietly accepted by most.⁶ On the other hand, in hindsight, the Reformation meant a strong impetus toward the gradual development into a situation in which marriage and family steadily became the norm and singleness the exception, a situation which has only very recently begun to change in Western culture.⁷ For many present-day Protestant Christians, the strong ascetic ideals characteristic of early Christianity come as a surprise.

In this article, I approach the early Christian ideal of asceticism through a specific lens, namely, the question of remarriage. While most ascetically inclined authors regarded virginity as the perfect choice, they also accepted marriage, so long as it happened only once. Subsequent marriages were discouraged and widowhood praised as the second best choice, nearly as virtuous as virginity. As a biblical scholar, I am particularly interested in the role of scripture in early-Christian discourses. How was scriptural authority conceived and made use of? And vice versa, how did appealing to certain scriptural texts give such texts a sense of “biblical” authority? Especially intriguing from this perspective is the treatment of scriptural passages that would seem to run counter to ascetic ideas. In so far as monogamy is concerned, one such text is 1 Timothy 5:14, which recommends remarriage to young widows: “So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us.”⁸ In light of such a passage, I ask the following question: how did ascetically-minded writers, who, to varying degrees, opposed remarriage, understand 1 Timothy 5:14 and make it cohere with their doctrine of the superiority of celibacy? In my analysis, I pay special attention to reading strategies

that help commentators both to interpret a given passage in a way that suits their agenda and to refute competing interpretations.

The importance of asceticism in shaping early Christianity has become well noted in scholarship in the recent thirty years or so.⁹ While a heightened emphasis on ascetic ideals can be seen in fourth-century sources, it is important to note that ascetic trends can be located in the earliest Christian teachings and that there were parallel developments in the broader Late Antique culture.¹⁰ Ideals of sexual abstinence can already be found in Paul's letters to the Corinthians: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am" (1 Cor 7:8). This became one of the favourite scriptural verses for many ascetic writers, who also quoted approvingly the imperative that a bishop be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3:5) and that a real widow have been "the wife of one husband" (1 Tim 5:9)—commands which they took to be written by the same apostle. It was not as easy for them to understand why Paul had urged young widows to marry.¹¹

According to scholarly consensus, 1 Timothy and other so-called Pastoral Epistles (2 Timothy, Titus) are pseudepigraphal, that is, not authored by Paul but by someone else under his name. One of the salient features of these texts is the appropriation of Paul's teachings on marriage and celibacy to a new historical situation. In accordance with this view, I make a distinction between the apostle Paul and the author(s) of 1 Timothy, whom I call "the pastoral Paul."¹² Ancient writers, however, were not aware of such an authorial distinction, and, hence, could not resolve disagreements between two given texts by discarding the advice of the latter to allow younger widows to remarry. One of the convictions of early-Christian commentators was that the apostle could not have contradicted himself—nor other apostles, nor the teachings of the Old Testament, for that matter.¹³ If scriptures seemed to contain disagreements, these were only apparent conflicts; a truly faithful teacher would have been able to extract the true meaning of each passage and bring them into harmony.

Reading scriptures in service of an ascetic agenda involved several interpretative strategies.¹⁴ The basic method was to read a problematic passage in light of other, more favourable ones. Another common technique was to relativize the difficult text in one way or another, for example, by restricting its applicability to a certain group of people. In the following, I will give some examples of such strategies. I confine my discussion to three texts, chosen out of numerous candidates,¹⁵ that represent different times and geographical locations as well as partly different attitudes toward asceticism. These are Tertullian's *On Monogamy*, John Chrysostom's *Against Remarriage*, and Epiphanius's *Panarion*. While all ascetically inclined authors held sexual renunciation and celibacy in high esteem, they differed in their understanding of what marriage entailed in relation to widows. Some rejected remarriage outright, while others tolerated it reluctantly; still others accepted it as a concession, as a lesser evil than fornication. Moreover, there were also voices in defence of marriage, the best known example of which is Jovinian, mainly known through Jerome's fierce attacks against him, though he was not alone in this matter.¹⁶ Opposition to ascetic ideals also seems to have been widespread, if the complaints of ascetically-minded writers are trustworthy.

Before I proceed to analysing ancient texts, I shall give an overview on the societal status of widows and their different roles in ancient discourses.

Who were widows in Late Antiquity and why would they (not) remarry?

In present-day parlance, the word "widow" refers to a woman whose husband has died. Because of the high life expectancy of modern-day Western societies, most widows are, at least in imagination, elderly women. In Late Antiquity, the situation was more varied. Given a low marriage age and a higher mortality rate among relatively young people, it was not exceptional to lose one's spouse at a young age. Since the wife was often several years younger than her husband, there were probably more widows than widowers.¹⁷ In any case, ancient sources depict a curious gender imbalance: widows form a clear group of their own, e.g. listed separately in census records, while widowers are

hardly ever mentioned in any source. Even though celibacy became an early-Christian ideal for men as well as for women, the discourse on remarriage is focused almost exclusively on women. Yet many women lost their lives during childbirth, meaning that the number of widowers must also have been high. It seems, thus, that remarriage must have been the norm for widowers.

The age factor is not the only difference between ancient and modern widowhood. Another dissimilarity pertains to the fact that the terms denoting widows were applied to all solitary women, including divorcées.¹⁸ Thus a *χήρα* or a *vidua* was any woman who lived without a man, not only a woman who lived without a husband.¹⁹ The celibate status of these solitary women was a cultural norm. In some early Christian sources, no clear dividing line exists between virgins and widows.²⁰ In ascetic discourse, no distinction was made between whether a marriage had ended because of death or because of divorce. In either case, remarriage was strongly discouraged.

In their insistence on the inferiority of remarriage, ascetic writers went against the currents of common practice. Even though the ideal of monogamy for women existed in Roman society—virtuous *matronae* were praised as *univira* or *uni nupta*²¹—widows were expected to remarry, especially if they still were capable of bearing children.²² This was reinforced by legislation, which ordered that widows were to marry again within a period of two (or three) years.²³ In medical discourses, sexual abstinence was regarded unhealthy for women who had previously been sexually active, and remarriage was recommended for those who were “too young for their widowhood.”²⁴

On the other hand, both legal and literary sources describe ideals and culturally valued standards which did not always materialize in real life.²⁵ The data gathered from census returns of Roman Egypt indicate that for a woman to live without a husband was not exceptional. Based on the ages collected in these returns, it has been estimated that widows were unlikely to remarry after the age of thirty or thirty-five.²⁶ Was this because they chose not to remarry or did they remain solitary because they did not have another option? It is evident that voluntary widowhood required a certain level of wealth; further down the social scale, pressures to remarry for financial reasons

increased.²⁷ On the other hand, the older (i.e. postmenopausal) and the more socio-economically inferior the woman was, the more difficult it was for her to find a second husband.²⁸ Clearly, then, many widows did not choose to remain widowed, but were *unable* to remarry.

This calls for a reassessment of the common scholarly view according to which widowhood was an attractive choice for women, because it granted them (at least relative) independence.²⁹ First, this view does not take into consideration differences among women of varying socio-economic status and age. Second, remarriage did not necessarily restrict the freedom of action and sphere of influence of (privileged) widows. On the contrary, a new marriage often meant an improved social status, extended networks and other resources.³⁰ Third, sources discouraging remarriage do not allow us to hear the voice of the widowed women themselves and, thus, we do not know what their reasons for remaining solitary were.³¹ While several male authors give as one of the reasons for widowhood the escape from the hardships of marriage and of raising children,³² they do not express any anxiety about widows being too independent and uninhibited by male control.³³

It is important to emphasize that there was no stark contrast between pagans who remarried freely, on the one hand, and Christians who refrained from a second marriage, on the other.³⁴ It is likely that most widowed women in Late Antiquity, pagan as well as Christian, remarried, if they had the choice. At the same time, there were women, pagan as well as Christian, who remained solitary, for one reason or another. Many Christians did not hesitate to remarry their widowed relatives. For example, according to the *Life of Olympias*, the Christian emperor Theodosius wanted to remarry Olympias to his relative, but she refused and opted for a monastic life.³⁵

Many of the early Christian sources that promote widowhood are private letters and other texts addressed to widows themselves.³⁶ Is the eloquence of their argumentation due to the fact that these widows were considering remarriage? Ascetic authors, at any rate, give several reasons why they should not remarry. In addition to listing the earthly troubles that would follow in married life, they also remind their audience of the future rewards that would await those who renounce worldly

pleasures. Those who keep their widowhood and suffer the constraints it brings will obtain heavenly crowns—with a luminosity that matches the duration of their widowhood.³⁷ While there is no reason to doubt that these authors, themselves celibate, sincerely believed in such theological reasons, it is also true that wealthy widows were particularly useful to them. Many wealthy widows were generous sponsors, who established and maintained monasteries, supported clerics, cared for the poor and needy and took care of their ascetic friends.³⁸ Remarriage might have spelled the end of such benefits.

“Let younger ones marry”: The ambiguous teaching of the pastoral Paul

This complexity pertaining to widows and widowhood in Late Antiquity often makes it challenging to reconstruct what is actually at stake in early-Christian discourses on widows. This becomes particularly evident when the recommendation to let younger widows marry (1 Tim 5:14) is examined in its broader context. The pastoral letter of 1 Timothy contains a long section on widows, where widows appear in several different roles. First, widows are mentioned as objects of charity. The addressee of the letter is urged to “honour” (τιμάω) widows who are really (ὁντως) widows (v. 3). This seems to refer to the financial support of destitute widows who do not have children or other relatives to take care of them. Second, the letter talks about the agency of widows; a real widow is expected to “be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints’ feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way” (v. 10). Those who fulfil requirements regarding age and proper behaviour are to be gathered in a list (καταλέγω), but the function of such a listing remains unclear and is hotly debated among scholars.³⁹ Third, widows are part of an ascetic discourse, as the pastoral Paul refuses to take widows under sixty years of age onto the list of widows for fear that, “when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge” (vv. 11–12). For this reason, the author recommends remarriage.

These three discourses are intertwined, but it is not quite obvious how they are connected. In relation to young widows, further ambiguities follow.⁴⁰ For example, how should the word πίστις be understood? As above, rendered according to the NRSV translation, the first “pledge”? Have the women taken some kind of a vow at the time they are listed as widows? Or should πίστις be taken as referring to faith, as the KJV and many other translations understand it? If in the latter sense, does πίστις refer to the widows’ faith in Christ (cf. v. 11) or their faithfulness to their deceased husbands? Moreover, verse 14 speaks literally of “younger” females (νεωτέρας), not of widows. While this may be inferred from verse 11, where “younger widows” (νεωτέρας χήρας) are explicitly mentioned, it is intriguing that the advice in verse 14 is to “marry,” not to “remarry” as if the pastoral Paul also had in mind women who had never married. Be that as it may, such ambiguities provided room for speculation, which enabled ascetically inclined commentators to read the verse in support of their agenda.

Notwithstanding all these ambiguities in the passage, the distinctions between the different kinds of widows are clear enough. Some are young, others are old; some can support themselves (and others), others need support; some have children or relatives, others have none.⁴¹ The most important distinction of all is that between good widows, known for their good works and their faithfulness, and bad widows, known for their idleness and pleasure-seeking. Many early commentators of this teaching thus advise their audience on how to become a real widow, pleasing to God, not a wanton widow who only pleases herself. I now give some examples of such readings.

Tertullian: Only widows of pagan husbands may marry

In the words of Peter Brown, “[w]ith Tertullian, we have the first consequential statement ... of the belief that abstinence from sex was the most effective technique with which to achieve clarity of soul.”⁴² Active in Carthage around the year 200, Tertullian was a prolific writer who devoted several of his treatises to the questions of marriage and remarriage. He accepted marriage but preferred celibacy (also within marriage) and strongly opposed remarriage.⁴³ While this is the

general view found in all his texts on the topic, there are also differences among them, especially in relation to tone, style and moral absoluteness. In the treatise entitled *To His Wife*, he discourages remarriage but does not absolutely forbid it. There, he claims that Paul allows remarriage, albeit reluctantly, as a lesser evil than fornication.⁴⁴ In his *Exhortation to Chastity*, Tertullian argues that God has made his preference for celibacy known through Paul, and those who fail to follow predilection are guilty of sin.⁴⁵ In *On Monogamy*, Tertullian takes a more vehement stand and condemns not only those who marry again but also those who tolerate remarriage, whether or not they practice it themselves. Earlier scholarship tended to see a gradual change in Tertullian's thinking toward a growing Montanist inclination, with his allegedly final work, *On Monogamy*, having been characterized as one of his "most notable contributions to the cause of militant Montanism."⁴⁶ More recently, however, scholars have rightly questioned the underlying assumptions that there existed a socially distinct Montanist group in Carthage which Tertullian had joined and that his thinking developed in a linear manner from more "Catholic" into extremely "Montanist."⁴⁷

While in his discussions on marriage and remarriage Tertullian amply invokes the authority of the pastoral Paul and his teaching in 1 Timothy 5, it is only in *On Monogamy* where he refers what he views as the problematic advise to allow younger widows to remarry in 1 Timothy 5:14.⁴⁸ He introduces the verse as something his opponents readily cite to back up their viewpoint, according to which remarriage is acceptable, at least for the laity. Tertullian writes:

Another objection they urge is this: writing to Timothy, Paul wishes young women (*iuvenculas*) to marry, to bear children, to be mothers of families. He is directing his words to those women only whom he reproaches earlier, that is, young widows who were converted to the faith after the death of their husbands. When they have been followed by suitors for a while—when they have wantonly turned away from Christ, they wish to marry, having damnation, because they have made void their first faith, the faith, that is, to which they were converted in their widowhood, the faith which they professed and then did not retain. It is for this reason that he wishes them to marry; he wishes to keep them from making void the first faith of their

widowhood. He does not wish women to marry whenever, in their widowed state, being tempted or even grown wanton, they lose their desire to persevere. (*On Monogamy* 13.1–2)⁴⁹

From Tertullian's perspective, the apostle cannot mean that widows are allowed to remarry. Thus, he applies a twofold strategy to find a more suitable meaning to the text. First, he reads the text in light of Paul's other teachings, committed to the general principle that "things uncertain should be prejudged by things certain and things obscure by things manifest."⁵⁰ In other words, passages that present difficulties to his ascetic programme are read through "less obscure" passages that are more helpful for promoting asceticism. Second, he relativizes the recommendation of remarriage and argues that it only applies to certain people under certain circumstances. Tertullian expresses these principles in the following way:

This, then, is our interpretation of the passage. We must examine it to see whether it harmonizes with the time and occasion of writing, with illustrations and arguments used earlier, as well as with assertions and opinions which follow later on, and—most important of all—whether it agrees with the advice of the Apostle and his own personal practice. Obviously, there is nothing to be more sedulously avoided than inconsistency. (Tertullian, *On Monogamy* 11.19)

While the first rule may, from a modern perspective, sound almost compatible with critical biblical scholarship—every passage must be understood in the context of the time and occasion of its writing—Tertullian uses it only inasmuch as it helps him to qualify the apostle's teaching in a way that makes it consistent with promoting celibacy. In regard to 1 Timothy 5:14, Tertullian introduces two other Pauline teachings, both of which at first glance seem to accept remarriage but which he is able to explain otherwise. According to the first, "a wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." (1 Cor 7:39) Tertullian reasons that, here, Paul distinguishes between women widowed *before* their conversion and those widowed *after* their conversion. The liberty to marry whomever she wishes applies only to the woman who has lost her husband before she had become Christian. Since the first marriage was not "in the Lord", it was not a true marriage and, thus, the woman is free to

marry—it will not count as remarriage. According to the second teaching, as long as the husband is alive, the wife is bound by law to him, but, after his death, “she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man” (Rom 7:3). Here Tertullian draws attention to the wider context of the passage, wherein Paul proclaims that the followers of Christ “have become dead to the law through the body of Christ” (v. 4). Thus, if Christians are dead to the law which allows second marriage, they are no longer permitted to act according to this law. In other words: “For now you are made dead to the law and, therefore, no longer free to do this, since you are no longer under the law which permitted you to do so.” (*On Monogamy* 13.3–6; cf. Rom 7:2–6.)

Tertullian finds a similar logic in 1 Timothy 5:14. He takes the word πίστις to mean faith in Christ and understands Paul’s approval of second marriage to apply only to women married and widowed before their conversion—and, even then, only in a situation where they run the risk of losing their new faith by falling into sin in their “wantonness”. In Tertullian’s understanding, then, the pastoral advice is addressed to young women who are allowed to marry; it is not about the remarriage of widows. To reach this conclusion, Tertullian complements the reading of this passage with other Pauline passages—a strategy used frequently by many early commentators of scripture.⁵¹ What is peculiar to Tertullian, however, is his appeal to the authority of the Paraclete. Did not the Lord say, “I still have many things to say unto you, but you are not yet able to bear them: when the Holy Spirit shall come, He will lead you into all truth”? (*On Monogamy* 2.2; cf. John 16:12–13) According to Tertullian, the Paraclete does not teach novel things but rather illuminates the true meaning of the apostolic teaching.

John Chrysostom: Remarriage better than fornication

John Chrysostom lived in a world very different from Tertullian. Whereas the latter was active around the year 200 in North Africa, where the nascent Christian movement formed only a small minority in a predominantly non-Christian environment, Chrysostom was a powerful fourth-century

figure, first a presbyter and celebrated orator in Antioch, later a bishop in Constantinople at a time when Christianity had gained power and the bishop had close connections to the city's leading citizens and the imperial court.⁵² In spite of the different circumstances, both were ardent promoters of celibate lifestyle. Among Chrysostom's voluminous writings, several treat the topics of virginity and marriage. Chrysostom refers to 1 Timothy 5:14 in several of his homilies and other writings, but I confine my discussion here to his treatise *Against Remarriage* (*De non iterando conjugio*), which is usually dated to within his Antiochian period.⁵³ Ascetic lifestyle had, by then, become desirable; Chrysostom himself claimed that the church of Antioch hosted around three thousand virgins and widows.⁵⁴ Moreover, Chrysostom's intimate circle included several wealthy ascetic women from the upper echelons of society. While we mostly know about such women being in Constantinople, it is likely that Chrysostom also had powerful female friends and sponsors in Antioch.⁵⁵

Chrysostom belongs among the many ascetic authors who clearly prefer virginity, even though he also accepts marriage and even promotes it in some cases as an option to avoid fornication.⁵⁶ On a superficial level, he also seems to allow remarriage. However, his reluctance for it also becomes clear: the second marriage is in accordance to law, but the first marriage is "better by far than this."⁵⁷ It is worth emphasizing that, for Chrysostom (and, indeed, for many other ascetically inclined writers), virginity and widowhood were not only about celibacy; they were about virtuous life in general. According to this thinking, virtue is embodied in a celibate lifestyle—abstinence from sexual relations manifests virtuousness. However, celibacy alone does not suffice. Just like there were both wise and foolish virgins in the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew's gospel, so too are there good and bad widows. Most important is to show dignity and self-control, both in marriage and widowhood. A self-disciplined wife makes a dignified widow, and vice versa: several marriages attest to a weakness of character. Chrysostom writes:

The woman who bears widowhood easily often exercises self-control even while her husband lives; but she who endures the state grievously is ready to live not with two or three men only but with several, and can scarcely keep from sex when she is old. Therefore, just as the one marriage is indicative of much dignity and self-control, so a second marriage I would say is indicative ... of a soul weak and carnal, one tied to the earth and incapable of ever displaying anything great and lofty. (*Against Remarriage* 2)

Chrysostom encounters the same challenge here as Tertullian had: if remarriage is so undesirable, why did Paul encourage young widows to marry? Chrysostom solves this challenge using strategies similar to those Tertullian employed: he juxtaposes 1 Timothy 5:14 with another Pauline passage, and he contextualizes the teaching in a specific situation in the apostle's time. The counter-text for the advice to let young widows marry is found in 1 Corinthians 7:7.

Why then, you ask, did Paul forbid young women to remain as widows even if they were willing? For so he writes: "Refuse to enrol the younger widows." Paul did not forbid those who desired to remain as widows, rather they compelled him against his will to impose this rule upon them. If you wish to learn the will of Paul, hear what he says: "Given my preference, I should like you to be as I am," [1 Cor 7:7] that is, continent. Paul would not have been inconsistent or been caught in so great a contradiction nor would he, who desired that all be continent, have forbidden women who wished to remain as widows. (*Against Remarriage* 3)

Paul cannot contradict himself. His own wish becomes clear in his letter to the Corinthians, where he explicitly states that he does not want widows to remarry. The only way to solve the tension is to understand 1 Timothy 5:14 as the result of the widows' initiative: they want to marry and so they have forced him to make a concession. This was wise on Paul's part, continues Chrysostom, because it is much worse to first give a promise (of widowhood) and then break it, than not to give the promise at all in the first place:

For if you should intend to engage in second marriages, he says, do not profess widowhood; for breaking a promise is much worse than not promising at all. He allowed therefore successive intimate relationships not as if he were framing a law but as if he were making a concession. "I say this," he says, "by way of concession, not as a command because of your lack of self-control." [1 Cor 7:6] Thus, he prescribes the second marriage because of another greater evil

and indicates that it is an excuse for the weakness of many. But I assert that it is a weakness arising not from one's nature but from one's deliberate choice. (*Against Remarriage* 3)

The other move in contextualizing the recommendation to remarry is to link it with a specific situation in Paul's life. According to Chrysostom, widows at that time had a particularly bad reputation because of their arrogant and reckless lifestyle after they had become widows. In this way, they risked the honour of the whole community, and Paul had to restrict their freedom by insisting that they remarry:

It is likely that many widows at that time had lived more recklessly and arrogantly after the death of their husbands as if freed from some constraining tyranny of their husbands over them; and so they earned a bad reputation for themselves because of their audacity. Drawing them back from their ruinous freedom, Paul leads them back to their former yoke. He says that if a widow intends to secretly prostitute and dishonour herself, it is much better to marry and "give our enemies no occasion to speak ill of us." Thus, because he did not want to furnish opportunities for rebuke or want the widow to live a wanton life of a harlot, he prescribed second marriages. (*Against Remarriage* 3)

Such measures are no longer necessary—in the case of good widows. Even considering remarriage is a sign of weakness, a sign of falling into the reprehensible category of wanton widows.

Chrysostom's statement, that Paul would want all widows to "profess widowhood", reveals the ambiguity: "true" widowhood is something more than mere marital status. Not all who have lost a husband are widows in the true sense of the word.

The true sign of widowhood is its voluntariness. This emphasis is important for Chrysostom, as he wishes to distinguish true asceticism, which he himself represents, from heretical, false asceticism. In his view, heretics are those who do not allow a second marriage under any circumstances, meaning that celibacy is forced on everyone and, hence, it cannot be chosen freely. This, in turn, shows that "heretical" celibates are celibates for the wrong reasons. From a critical point of view, it is hard to see any phenomenological differences between these types of ascetic

practices, making it hard to avoid the conclusion that “our” asceticism is true while “their” asceticism is wrong—just like our teachers, prophets and martyrs are true while their teachers, prophets and martyrs are false. The desire to distinguish the “right” kind of asceticism from a “wrong” kind is also evident in my third example, the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis.

Epiphanius: allowing remarriage shows that asceticism is a free choice

Epiphanius of Salamis, a rough contemporary of Chrysostom, represents an entirely different stance toward remarriage. While himself a strong proponent of celibacy, known for his ascetic life and his conviction that a life of celibacy merited greater reward in heaven, he also approved of marriage and remarriage.⁵⁸ This had much to do with his interests in combating heresy. Epiphanius is, in fact, best known for his massive heresiography, entitled *Panarion* (literally, “medicine chest”), wherein he provides “antidotes” against various heretical “diseases.” Several of these groups are characterized by what Epiphanius deems as *false* asceticism.

In his attacks against such practices, Epiphanius cites 1 Timothy 5:14 in his polemics against six (out of 80) different heretical groups. In all but one case, the fault Epiphanius exposes is excessive asceticism.⁵⁹ I focus on one of the remaining five groups as an exemplar of the rest, a group Epiphanius calls the Apostolics (or Apotactics).⁶⁰ Epiphanius claims that they originate from the circles of Tatian and the Encratites and that “they do not accept marriage at all” (*Panarion* 61.1.2). The Apostolics renounce all possessions, do not allow readmission to lapsed members, and read, instead of the ecclesiastical canon, the *Acts of Andrew* and the *Acts of Thomas*. Such iniquities are “self-chosen regulations,” which have “deprived them of God’s loving kindness” (*Panarion* 61.1.3–5).

To be sure, ascetic inclination as such is not a problem in Epiphanius’s view. On the contrary, “God’s holy church ... regards continence as the most admirable and commends it.” The problem, according to Epiphanius, is the disregard of marriage on the part of the Apostolics and their contempt for those who are married and stay married (*Panarion* 61.3.4–6; cf. 4.4). The

dividing line between true asceticism (represented by Epiphanius) and false asceticism (represented by the Apostolics) is whether such asceticism originates from the exercise of free will. Since the Apostolics only accept those who renounce everything, including property and marriage, asceticism for them is a compulsion. Not so with *true* ascetics. As Epiphanius explains in his discussion against Montanists, “as a good counsel we urge those who can [follow this rule], but we lay no necessity on one who cannot, and surely do not expel him from life” (*Panarion* 48.9.7–8.).

This also explains Epiphanius’s leniency toward remarriage. From this point of view, the pastoral recommendation to marry young widows does not pose as big of a problem for Epiphanius as it had for many other ascetic authors. Even so, Epiphanius had still to resolve the apparent contradictions in the apostolic teaching: how could Paul at the same time have wished for everyone to remain celibate (“To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am”; 1 Cor 7:8), allow fathers to marry off their virgin daughters (1 Cor 7:36),⁶¹ and permit young widows to remarry (1 Tim 5:14)? Epiphanius’s solution was to assign the word “virgin” different meanings depending on its context: those who should not seek to marry are virgins who have consecrated themselves to God, while those who should be married off are yet-unmarried daughters.

Moreover, Epiphanius contextualizes Paul’s permission of marriage; it is not a universal law but was instead given in a specific historical situation. The virgin daughters who can be married are virgins “not for virginity’s sake but because of their inability to find husbands.” The inability was the result of the fact that the apostles were Jewish and followed the Jewish law, according to which they did not want to give their daughters as wives to gentiles. When they had become Christians, they continued this practice, wanting to marry their daughters only to fellow Christians, the latter of whom, however, were still few in number. Therefore, “the fathers of virgin daughters would keep their virgins at home for a long time if they could not give them to Christians, and when they were past their prime they would fall into fornication from the necessity of nature.” The apostle saw the

harm of such strictness and thus allowed fathers to marry their daughters to non-Christians so as to avoid fornication. By a similar logic, he lets young widows remarry (*Panarion* 61.5.1–6.7).

Epiphanius's reading strategy is, thus, similar to that of Tertullian and Chrysostom in the sense that he relativizes scriptural passages to apply only to certain people in certain situations. Whereas Tertullian justified his understanding of scriptural passages by appealing to the new revelation by the Paraclete, Epiphanius leans on tradition:

However, none of the sacred words need an allegorical interpretation of their meaning; they need examination, and the perception to understand the force of each proposition. But the tradition must be used too, for not everything is available from the sacred scripture. Thus the holy apostles handed some things down in scriptures but some in tradition. (*Panarion* 61.6.4–5)

Despite his rather sympathetic attitude toward remarriage, Epiphanius does not, in his commentary on 1 Timothy 5:14, emphasize the acceptability of remarriage but rather the judgment which will follow if a woman should break her vow:

And that this is the case the same apostle will teach us by saying “Younger widows refuse; for after they have waxed wanton against Christ they will marry; having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith.” If even a woman who has been widowed after knowing the world will be condemned for abandoning her first faith because she has vowed to God and then married, how much more will a virgin, if she marries after devoting herself to God without having known the world? (*Panarion* 61.6.8–9)

It is not difficult to infer whereupon Epiphanius's emphases fall and whereupon his sympathies lie. After all, the exhortation to marry young widows is a safeguard against false asceticism. It does not change the fact that virginity is the preferable, *voluntary* state of being, the best contest with the most cherished prize:

“Let them marry, bear children, guide the house” is a concise and temperate retort to those who think evil of every disposition in the church's tradition. It is the repudiation of those who call themselves Apostolics, Apotactics and Encratites; also of the soft-headed churchmen who persuade women to shirk from running of a full course, refusing to finish the race because of its

length. And whoever repudiates virginity for God's sake and dishonors the contest, is a sinner and liable to judgment. If an athlete cheats in a game he is flogged and put out of the contest; and anyone who cheats on virginity is ejected from a race, crown and prize of such importance (*Panarion* 61.7.1–3)

Concluding Remarks

In the words of Elizabeth Clark, the ascetically inclined early-Christian writers “had to walk a thin line to uphold their own ascetic values yet distinguish themselves from their ‘heretical’ opponents.”⁶² This balancing act proved successful, and the ideal of the celibate life as the most preferable lifestyle prevailed for centuries. It was not until around one thousand years later that this ideal was successfully challenged. Luther and other Reformation theologians had little difficulties in recasting 1 Timothy 5:14 and other family-oriented teachings of the New Testament, pushing them into the limelight. As is well known, Luther gave the so-called *Haustafeln* (Eph 5:22–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1; etc.) a primary place of importance by including them within his Catechisms. In his lectures on 1 Timothy, he admits that almost all theologians have taken the apostle's teaching to mean that he forbids remarriage. This, according to Luther, cannot be right, since it would contradict Paul's teaching elsewhere, namely, “it is better to marry than to burn” (1 Cor 7:9). For the same reason, Paul does not want widows to remain husbandless.⁶³

Much more difficult for Luther was Paul's recommendation that the unmarried and the widowed remain as they are, a recommendation that constituted one of the most popular and most effective scriptural passages for the ascetically inclined authors. Luther solves this difficulty by admitting that, “indeed, it is well to remain like St. Paul” but reminding his audience that

he goes right on to say why it is not well to remain so and better to marry again than to remain a widow. Here St. Paul has piled all the reasons for marrying in one heap and set the goal for all the glory of chastity when he says: “But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry.” This is as much as to say: Necessity orders that you marry.⁶⁴

Thus, what for the ascetic authors had been a reluctant concession on Paul's part, was for Luther the norm and even an imperative. Even though the conclusions of these thinkers were almost diametrically opposite, it is intriguing to see that their reading strategies were not all that different.

Nevertheless, there remains one important difference between Late Antique and Reformation commentators. Tertullian, Chrysostom, Epiphanius, and other early Christian authors were not Protestant theologians. Their disposition to scriptures did not follow a *sola scriptura* principle; they did not even have a Bible in the sense that Reformers or twenty-first century readers understand that term.⁶⁵ What was important for them rather was what they called apostolic tradition, and they often strengthened their views by quoting what "the apostle said." Since they understood themselves to be part of the same tradition, it was not insignificant to show that the apostle agreed with their ascetic discourses in what he said—or at least in what he meant.

Notes

1 Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 33–35.

2 "Such persons are rare, not one in a thousand, for they are a special miracle of God." *Estate of Marriage* 1 (WA 10/2.279.19–21; trans. Brandt in *Luther's Works* 45). Cf. *To the Christian Nobility* 13 (WA 6.440.10–12); *Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows: On Virginity* (WA 8.583.30–34).

3 *To the Christian Nobility* 14 (WA 6.442.1–2; trans. Atkinson in *Luther's Works* 44.)

4 Juntunen, "Sex", 200–204.

5 This can be observed in demographic development. The population of Western Europe increased rapidly in the first half of the second millennium until the 14th century and the arrival of the Black Death; see Kowaleski, "Gendering Demographic Change." According to her estimate, in North-western Europe, 10–20 percent of people never married, a high proportion compared to other parts of Europe. Cf. Wogan-Browne, "Virginity Now and Then," 236. For earlier centuries in the history of Christianity, see Osiek & MacDonald, *Women's Place*, 4–6; Vuolanto, *Children and Asceticism*, 218.

6 Plummer, *From Priest's Whore*, 3.

7 Martin, "Familiar Idolatry", 103–104.

8 All quotations of the Bible are according to the New Revised Standard Version, if not otherwise noted.

9 Important studies abound. Some of the seminal works that have greatly impacted subsequent scholarship include Brown, *Body and Society*; Clark, *Reading Renunciation*; and Elm, “*Virgins od God*”. A commendable overview with bibliography can be found in Kraviec, “Asceticism.”

10 See Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 14–42.

11 There were also several other, less helpful scriptural passages for ascetic-minded authors, such as Jesus’s approving quotation of the Genesis text “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Matt 19:5; cf. Gen 2:24), or the Pauline household codes that gave no indication as to whether celibacy was superior to marriage and the raising of children (Eph 5:22–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1), or the condemnation of those who forbade marriage as followers of deceitful spirits (1 Tim 4:1–5).

12 Following Fatum, “Christ Domesticated,” 176–177 and *passim*; Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender*, 5.

13 Tertullian, *On the Prescription of Heretics*; Origen, *On First Principles* 3.20; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.13.5.

14 See Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, esp. 364–370 in relation to 1 Timothy 5.

15 Other texts that comment on 1 Tim 5:14 include, among others, John Chrysostom, *Letter to a Young Widow* 2; Basil the Great, *Epistle* 199.9; Ambrose, *On Widows* 2.12; Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on 1 Timothy* 5:3; Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on 1 Timothy* 5:14; Athanasius, *Letter to Virgins*; Jerome, *Epistle* 52.16; *Life of Olympias* 3.

16 On Jovinian, see Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*.

17 Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law*, 219; Krause, *Witwen und Waisen*, 45.

18 Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 498.

19 Methuen, “Virgin Widow,” 286–287.

20 Ignatius of Antioch, for example, sends his greetings to “the virgins who are called widows”; *Letter to the Smyrneans* 13. Tertullian, for his part, shows an interest to separate these categories more clearly; cf. *On the Veiling of Virgins* 19.2–3. A third example is Macrina, who, according to her brother, Gregory of Nyssa, refused to marry after the death of her fiancé, and considered herself a widow, even though she had never married. *Life of Macrina* 964C–D.

21 Lightman and Zeisel, “Univira,” 20–25, with examples. Treggiari (*Roman Marriage*, 235) points out that most of the women who were praised as *univira* died relatively young (and did not survive their spouses?).

22 Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 501; Krause, *Witwen und Waisen*, vol. 1, 157–191.

23 Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law*, 219–236.

24 Hanson, “Widows Too Young,” 149–150.

25 Krause, *Witwen und Waisen*, vol. 1, 101.

26 Hanson, “Widows Too Young,” 150–153; Hylan, *Modest Apostle*, 36–37.

27 Evans Grubbs, *Women and Law*, 220.

28 Krause, *Witwen und Waisen*, vol. 1, 101, 192–193.

29 Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 501; Krause, *Witwen und Waisen*, vol. 2, 252.

30 Hylan, *Modest Apostle*, 36–37.

31 Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 25.

32 An illuminating example is given by John Chrysostom in *Against Remarriage* 5: “... what profit would there be in choosing bondage instead of freedom? Of what advantage is much wealth when one cannot use it for what one wants? Is it not much better to have a few things with authority over them than to possess everything in the world under the condition that a woman submit herself together with everything else to the power of another? I pass over now the anxieties, the spiteful behavior, the reproaches, the envy, the rash suspicions, the pains of childbirth and everything else. [...] It is well to add this point: [...], even as the widow’s husband loves her as a wife, he would not love her as he would a virgin bride. It is clear to all that the love for virgins is more frenzied and impetuous by far; but a husband will not embrace and love a widow wholeheartedly because she knew another man.” (trans. Shore). Cf. Jerome, *Epistle* 54.15.

33 Lehtipuu, “Example of Thecla,” 364.

34 Cf. Krause, *Witwen und Waisen*, vol. 1, 186.

35 Cooper, *Band of Angels*, 146–155.

36 Krause, *Witwen und Waisen*, vol. 1, 101.

37 Cf. John Chrysostom, *Against Remarriage* 6.

38 Bremmer, “Pauper or Patroness,” 48–49.

39 Particularly debated has been the question of whether widows formed an “order” of their own, i.e. whether they constituted a specific group with designated tasks. Another question has been whether the limitation of enrolled widows “crowded out” other women for leadership roles. For a discussion, see, e.g., Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender*, 144–146; Hylan, *Modest Apostle*, 62–69.

40 Cf. Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender*, 146, 160.

41 Bremmer, “Pauper or Patroness,” 36.

42 Brown, *Body and Society*, 78.

43 This, he argued, was what the Lord and his apostles had taught; *To His Wife* 1.3.2, cf. Matt 19:11–12 and 1 Cor 7.

44 *To His Wife* 1.3.5.

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- 45 *Exhortation to Chastity* 3.4–5.
- 46 LeSaint, “Introduction,” 67.
- 47 Wilhite, “Tertullian on Widows,” 227–228; Dunn, *Tertullian*, 6–9.
- 48 Cf. Bremmer, “Patroness or Pauper,” 40; Wilhite, “Tertullian on Widows,” 226.
- 49 Translation here and elsewhere from ANF.
- 50 Cf. another treatise of Tertullian, *On the Resurrection* 21.2.
- 51 Cf. Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 122–128.
- 52 Meyer & Allen, *John Chrysostom*, 3–16.
- 53 Clark, “Introduction,” ix.
- 54 *Homily in Matthew* 66.3; Cf. Brown, *Body and Society*, 306.
- 55 Mayer, “Constantinopolitan Women,” 281–282.
- 56 Brown, *Body and Society*, 307–309.
- 57 *Against Remarriage* 1. Cf. “But just as when we speak on behalf of virginity, in exalting it we do not dishonor marriage, so when we speak about widowhood, while we do not consider the second marriage to be among forbidden activities, we do exhort widows to be content with their first husbands.” All translations of *Against Remarriage* are taken from Shore.
- 58 Cf. Jacobs, *Epiphanius*.
- 59 This sole exception is a group Epiphanius calls the “Gnostics,” whom he accuses of overly libidinous behaviour. He paints a picture of wild orgies, where the Gnostics “have wives in common,” and he complains how “they never have their fill of copulation, but in their circles the more indecent a man is, the more praiseworthy they consider him” (*Panarion* 28.11.9, trans. Williams). Such sexual slander was a commonplace of ancient polemics; cf. Knust, *Abandoned by Lust*.
- 60 The name ἀποτακτικοί was used as a positive designation for those ascetics who lived a communal life in Egypt, but it gradually became associated with groups that were deemed heretical. See Goehring, “Through a Glass Darkly,” 68–69.
- 61 The NRSV takes “virgin” here to mean one’s fiancée, not daughter.
- 62 Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 42.
- 63 *Lectures on 1 Timothy*, trans. Dinda in *Luther’s Works* 28 (WA 26.90.37–91.5).
- 64 *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 7, trans. Sittler in *Luther’s Works* 28 (WA 12.113.17–22).
- 65 Lehtipuu & von Weissenberg, “Early Christian Scriptures,” forthcoming.

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